

The Assistant

When I first met Dibbs he asked me, "So which do you prefer: white noise or pink noise? When you're jerking-off that is. Which do you listen to?"

I replied, "Actually mister, when I'm jerking-off, I'm listening to your mom gagging, cause she's got my balls in her mouth."

"Charming," he said, "but trust me Mr. Cushion, it's not my mother you want sucking on your balls. No, I take you for a Bo Derek guy. All you boys fantasize about her. And I'm guessing you're listening to white noise when you do. Am I right Mr. Cushion? Don't get me wrong, Bo Derek is...radical, as you kids say these days. But just you wait. In another 10 years or so, internet porn is coming, and what a beautiful day that will be for you. Why, it's gonna replace fresh air as your new best friend. You and all the young hound dogs like you. You've no idea what the internet is, do you? Of course not, you don't even know what Diet Coke is. Smokey, m'boy, a highly-carbonated, technological revolution is only a decade away. For now, I guess you're stuck with porno mags and Tab cola."

"Look dude," I retorted, "I don't know what your damage is, but I'm not interested."

"You're right," he admitted, with a distracted, dreamy gaze; a gaze lost in recollection of the future. "You're right, I'm off a tangent. *Totally dude*. I do that, but do yourself a favor, when the internet is invented, buy up every domain containing the words: tits, ass, and hot Asian chicks. You'll thank me for it." Then he breathed deeply and sighed, "Now, let's get down to business, Smokey, my boy."

Yes, my name is Smokey. Smokey Cushion. Yes it's my real name and no, I don't know what my parents were thinking. Dibbs once said, "Life is measured by our actions, not our names. After all, a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet."

"Shakespeare?" I asked.

"Ted Danson," he replied.

Our paths first crossed at Carl's Video store in Great Neck, New York. This stranger, who the cosmos sent to serve *in loco parentis*, seemed to know a lot about me. Figuring out my name was easy enough, but how'd he know about the white noise? About Bo? To make matters weirder, he went ahead and offered me a job, right there in the video store.

"Now, let's get down to business, Smokey, my boy. I want you to work for me, to be my assistant."

"Listen man," I said, "I'm just here to rent some videos. I don't know who you are, or how you know so much about me, but leave me alone."

"My name is Dybbuk Greenberg, but you can call me Dibbs, and I can't leave you alone, Smokey, I need you to alter the future for me. The job is easy and the pay is *radical*. And yes, I know things about you Smokey. I know you live alone and have no job. I know you have no interest in college and college, sorry to say, has no interest in you. Isn't that right?"

I paused. So far, everything he'd said was true. Annoying, but accurate.

"I want you to fix the future for my clients. Think of it as being a guardian angel," Dibbs continued, "most alterations will be simple, but" he warned, "if you screw up, even something simple, and seemingly insignificant, someone could die. So you see it is a very important job."

I laughed. Did I believe him? No, I thought he was a crazy old man. But then I reconsidered. He promised the pay was good, and I needed the money. Then things got stranger still. Dibbs, who had already proven he knew a lot about me, somehow knew

about my medical condition, and promised he could help.

Actually, he said he could cure me.

You see I was suffering from tinnitus. I'll bet you've never heard that one. Tinnitus is medical-speak for ringing in the ear. In my case, it started when I was 13 (and it never stopped). I have lived with a loud ringing in my head, day in and day out, for nearly five years. Doctor Calaf (our family physician) had me on about ten different medications to help control it. All they did was turn me into a zombie, who slept half the day and spent the other half in a druggy haze. The quality of the ringing changed based on the drug I was taking. On Neurontin it sounded like a shrill, beaming "eeeeee" high pitched and sharp, cutting across my head. When I switched to Elavil, it sounded like metallic rain falling at the base of my skull. Sometimes, it was both. When the drugs came to nothing, my doctor injected steroids through my eardrum, which hurt like heck, and didn't work. The earsplitting noise penetrated, and subsequently ruined almost every aspect of my life.

I couldn't pay attention in class, I couldn't read books, and eventually wound up in a special-ed program. Pretty soon, I had no friends (special or otherwise), and no life. Sleep wasn't an escape either; the ringing even crept into my dreams and

courtesy of hefty doses of Xanax, and Prednisone, my dreams were little more than tripped-out nightmares.

I dropped out of school and moved out of my parents house when I turned 18; I think they were happy to see me go. I rented a studio apartment above Gino's Pizza, in Great Neck.

Even a teenager knows the signs of depression. I put on 30 unwanted pounds, slept, and smoked pot all day. Sometimes I smoked the Xanax. I watched a lot of TV. *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* were my favorites. The only real education I got was from watching the occasional *3-2-1 Contact*.

When I wasn't watching TV, eating or getting high, I was praying for a bus to hit me, or bolt of lightning to strike me, or a freakin zombie apocalypse. Anything to shorten my shitty life. Eventually I found white noise. It helped mask the ringing, so I bought a Sharper Image white noise generator and had it in the background ALL THE TIME. I cried a lot, even considered suicide. But then I met Dibbsy. I'm not sure if our meeting was accidental or otherwise. I never even saw him come in to the video store. Not that I was looking. After all, I was still a teenager, and despite the ringing, I was little more than a walking bag of hormones. I wouldn't have noticed Dibbs unless he was fifty years younger and had breasts.

Going to Carl's and renting movies was the closest thing I had to a good time. I usually picked out two rentals: one horror flick and one porno. The porno section was behind a black, shower curtain. If there were pretty girls in the store, I'd forgo the x-rated flicks; it's kinda hard to pick up chicks if you've just come from behind the black curtain. So, in those cases, I'd go to my backup: Bo Derek. Thanks to her (and the lineup of barely legal skin flicks she starred in) I was still able to enjoy the softer side of porn. And with benign sounding titles like *Bolero*, *Tarzan* and *10*, no one in the joint was the wiser. How these movies escaped an X-rating is still a mystery to me. I was in love with Bo Derek, or at least in lust. Dibbs once tried to clarify the two, "Love is a marathon," he explained, "and lust is a sprint. To do either you need to move fast and wear socks, so why bother?"

So I took the job. Dibbs put me to work, that very day. He gave me fifty bucks, right there in Carl's Video, and instructed me on the alteration of Mr. A's future. The task was simple: all I had to do was walk across the street, to the train station, and put a copy of the Bible on a specified bench, opened to Romans 12:19. Dibbs said that this simple task would save Mr. A's life.

So I did it. I crossed the street with a Bible he'd given me, and followed the instructions. Like I said, at the time, I thought Dybbuk Greenberg was crazy, but I was more than happy to take his money. I don't know if Mr. A saw the Bible, or read the verse. I imagined maybe he was suicidal, and planned to leap in front of the train. And Maybe, just maybe, Dibbs knew that reading Romans 12:19 would inspire Mr. A. I'm not even sure what the verse says, but I'm pretty sure no one jumped in front of the train that day.

We met outside Carl's Video, after I completed the task. He seemed very satisfied with me, "Great job Smokey. Here is something extra for you, call it tender beyond the almighty dollar." He handed me a bottle of little blue pills. "Look Smokey, I'm aware of your suffering, your tinnitus. It's fucking-up your life, isn't it?"

My eyes teared-up and I croaked, "Yes, it is."

"I'm gonna help you. Take these pills, one per day, and over time things will get better. Don't expect miracles, that's not my department, but they work better than smoking Xanax capsules."

I took the unlabeled, orange bottle, and studied it. The little blue pills were also unlabeled. I shook the bottle; the

pills rattled inside. I laughed, "How do you know this stuff about me? What's in these pills anyway?"

Before he could answer I said, "Dibbs, I have heard this all before. Take this pill, or that vitamin supplement. They never work, at least not for me."

He asked, "Will you give it a try? After all what have you got to lose?"

"Nothing I guess." So I thanked him for trying to help. When I got home, I took a blue pill as instructed and for the first time in a while, I felt what? Hope. Could this man be the big-cheese I'd been waiting for my whole life? Probably not, but a little bit of hope felt pretty good.

The next day, when I woke, my delicate grasp on this most fragile thing called hope gave way to reality. The ringing was still there, loud and piercing. Certainly no better, maybe even a little worse.

I met up with Dibbs later that day, behind the black shower curtain at Carl's Video. I told him the pills hadn't worked.

"What'd you think, five years of tinnitus is just gonna vanish? You have to be patient. Let me put this in parlance your generation can relate to. Does Pac-Man ever eat just one pill?"

No he tries to eat all the pills. Be like Pac-Man, keep eating the pills."

"Dibbs, I don't think they're pills he's eating, they're just dots on a screen, anyway it's the fruit that gives Pac-Man his strength," I said.

"Of course they're pills. The only reason he eats the fruit is to get the ghosts to quit hassling him for a moment, so he can eat more pills. Smokey, keep taking the pills. Trust me. And if on occasion you wanna eat fruit, and chase ghosts, be my guest."

Then Dibbs gave me my second assignment: Mr. B. I expected the tasks to get harder, but this was easier than the first. All I had to do was walk over to Beverly Road, a few blocks away, and move a rock out of the street. Dibbs told me that this simple action would prevent a fatal car crash for Mr. B and Dibbs paid me three-hundred bucks for another job well done.

My third job was about a week later. Unlike the first two, this one was illegal. I stole a diving board from a swimming pool, which belonged to Mr. C, who was gonna try a risky dive and end up in a coma. Dibbs paid me a thousand bucks for Mr. C, and gave me a refill on my little blue pills, which I continued taking even though they weren't working.

Two weeks later I again found myself behind the black shower curtain for assignment D. I had to make her miss a train. "I don't care how you do it," said Dibbs, "just make sure she misses the 5:24 p.m. train."

I liked this job best; Mrs. D was a hottie, a sexy forty-something, wearing neon biker shorts and a white t-shirt. I found her on the station platform, scrutinizing her purple and green Swatch. I casually made my way towards her. She stretched out over the track looking for the train. When our paths crossed, I tried chatting her up, "Coming from the gym?" I asked.

"Nope," she replied, not bothering to take her eyes off the tracks. The floating headlight of the train was now visible in the distance. The ringing in my head grew louder. Wait, the ringing in my head. That might work.

"Lady, can you help me. All of a sudden, there's a loud ringing in my head. I think...I need an ambulance, will you call for one?"

I started stumbling passed her, and almost fell over onto the tracks. She caught me and sat me on a bench.

"Are you diabetic or something?" she asked.

"No Ma'am. I'm not sure what's wrong, the ringing, it's so loud. There's a phone in the station. Can you call for help?"

"Are you alone? Isn't there someone else with you? I really need to catch this train."

"No, I'm alone, please help me. You can get the next train." As I finished my sentence, the train pulled up to the station and the doors opened. No one got off, thank God, as I'm sure she would have pawned me off to them. I was still her problem.

"Ding-Dong, this train is the 5:24 Port Washington local. This station is Great Neck. The next stop is--"

"PLEASE LADY help me," I said and I closed my eyes.

She must have considered leaving me because for a few moments she was silent...thinking. "Oh, damn it! Shit, of all the rotten luck. Kid, if you can hear me, I'm going inside to call for an ambulance." She laid me down on the bench and hurried back to the station. I opened my eyes and watched the train doors close. Both the train and myself were history when D got back.

On my way home, I picked up a few slices of pizza and a Tab from Gino's. The night sky was purple, on it's way to a twinkling black by the time I got home. I popped some pills

(including Dibb's blue pill) and turned on a movie. My head was ringing like the Liberty Bell. Soon the Xanax was kicking in and I was sleepy, so I pulled off my clothes, and tossed them to the floor. Next, I got in bed, turned up the groovy sounds of Sharper Image and it's white noise mannia, and slept deeply.

I woke the next day, feeling as close to great as my life would allow. Yes, the ringing was still there, and it was still loud, but I felt, what? Rested. The blue pills weren't doing shit, but I kept taking them, convinced that something would eventually happen. And of course, something did eventually happen but it wasn't an end to my tinnitus.

"Tomorrow, at 4 p.m. be at the Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay. There will be a man in the park, a groundsman, tending the miniature pines in the Dwarf Conifer garden. He is Mr. E and he's very important. You must protect him from his ex-girlfriend, Charlotte Horton. She will have him arrested for things he didn't do unless we stop her. If she lives, Mr. E will go to prison. I have never asked you to do something like for me before and I might never ask it again, but I need this woman dead. Meet her at the entrance of the arboretum. Take this gun. Shot her twice, drop the gun, and get outta there."

We were almost nose-to-nose behind the black shower curtain when Dibbs gave me these instructions and placed a pistol in my hand.

"Are you serious?" I whispered, "I can't shoot some random woman...I can't shoot anyone. I'm not an assassin. If E didn't do anything wrong then why not let the police sort it out?"

"Because the police are gonna get it wrong. They will convict him of domestic violence. His incarceration, though brief, will scare him straight, and I want him twisted. He has a brilliant future."

"What's he gonna do in the future?" I asked, "what can be so important it's worth murdering an innocent woman?"

"That's not your concern Smokey. Your job is to assist me. Not question me. That's how this relationship works."

"Yes, but Dibbs, you never asked me to hurt someone before. Don't you have someone else who can do this?"

"This job is yours Smokey. You've seen *The Godfather*. Do it Michael Corleone style, when he shoots Sollozzo and McCluskey in the Italian restaurant. Piece of cake. I've got fifty-grand for you when it's done."

"Fifty-grand?" I paused for a moment to consider, then said, "I'm sorry Dibbs, can't do it."

"Alright, listen Smokey, after this, no more murders. But you gotta do this one--"

"Look," I interrupted, "you've been real good to me and I appreciate that but...let's stick to the usual stuff, moving rocks, and opening doors."

"It's not always gonna be easy *stuff*. Smokey, I want you to understand this, so listen carefully. You have to do this job. If you don't, we can no longer work together. If you don't, there are no more jobs to follow. If you don't, I will cut off your supply of blue pills. Mr. E has a brilliant future."

"As what," I demanded, pushing him backwards into the porno rack.

"As a serial killer, you dipshit! They're all serial killers, or at least they will be, so long as you do your job. A, B, C, and D are all killers and thanks to your alterations of the future, they will live to carry out their crimes. But E is special. E is the Babe Ruth of serial killers. He'll be one of the greats, provided you get rid of that bitch Horton. So you're gonna do your job and save him from prison, or your blue pills are cut off."

"First of all Dibbs, those blue pills don't do shit. My tinnitus is as bad as ever. I only take the damn things to humor you. Second--"

Dibbs interrupted, "Smokey, I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. Those pills aren't exactly for tinnitus." An ugly smile crept across his old face.

"No shit Sherlock. So what do they do?" I asked, fearful of the answer.

"I call them my blue retribution."

"You're nuts Dibbs, and as it turns out, you're an asshole. Get bent dickhead. I'm out of here." I headed towards the curtain, but Dibbs grabbed me and pushed me back with surprising force.

"I've got you in a corner my boy. What my little blue pills do is hook almost every organ of your body up to need them. You think you know pain because you have a little ringing in your ear? Stop taking those pills, and you'll learn what pain really is. You're gonna need them everyday, forever and the only way to keep getting them is to keep doing your job. The withdrawal from blue retribution would drive you insane. It's a terrible way to go. I've seen it happen before. One day without them and you'd kill Bo Derek for another fix. And the beauty of this withdrawal

is that the symptoms never stop, never get sweated out of the system. Those blue pills are now as much a part of your life as the tinnitus is."

At that point I told him to fuck off. Then I went home. Of course one of the first things I did at home was to check my blue pill supply. Three left. I decided to skip that day's dose, to test out Dibb's threat. I was angry at him, defiant towards him. I didn't need his mysterious pills when I had my trusty bottle of Xanax. I went to bed convinced that I would be fine.

The next morning dawned gray and rainswept. I could smell the coffee brewing below at Gino's. Out my window, cars passed and everything seemed pretty normal. The ringing in my ear was louder but not by much. I began wondering about Mr. E and if he really was the all-star serial killer Dibbs said he would be. Maybe this whole stupid thing was some kinda loyalty test, to see how far I would go. It was crazy to think Dibbs could see into the future in the first place. I busied myself with household chores. I brewed coffee, did a load of laundry, even folded my clothes and tucked them neatly away in my dresser.

At around 10 a.m. I was sitting on my bed with a sheet of paper. I had made a list and tried to remember everything I could about would-be killers A through D. Where I was when I

helped them, what they looked like, their real names (if I knew) and rough ideas of their ages. I didn't come up with much. My plan was to give the list to the police. Of course, the police would never believe me. I was, after all, an 18-year-old dropout and recluse. And A through D hadn't really done anything, yet. Still, I was determined to try. I picked up the phone to call 911. That's when the ringing got louder. Much louder. At least ten times louder. Pain began rising up both my legs. It felt like scissors cutting into my calfs. An extreme craving came over me for...what? I didn't know. A cold sweat broke across my face.

I swallowed a Xanax and forced half a slice of cold pizza in my mouth. It did nothing, the pain got worse, and was spreading. I fell to the floor, on my knees, writhing in pain, "Fuck you Dibbs," I managed to say. I reached under my bed, grabbing a bottle of Scotch, and plucked out the cork with my teeth. I drank deeply. Dibbs wasn't kidding. This was the worst pain I had ever felt and it would surely drive me insane (and perhaps willing to commit murder to make it stop). It was difficult to breathe, but no matter how hard I sucked air, the sensation persisted. I threw myself towards the dresser and grabbed the bottle. 3 little pills left. I broke a pill in half,

and took a half-pill with a swig of Scotch. Almost instantly, the symptoms began abating. Except of course for the tinnitus, which now seemed like a mosquito bite compared to what I had coming if I didn't get more blue pills.

I sat back on my bed, next to my stupid list...and cried. I took Dibb's pistol and pressed it to my ear, where the ringing was loudest. I put my finger into the trigger-guard and gently touched the steel arch. Then something very strange happened: at once, the ringing stopped.

For the first time in years, I heard...nothing. Silence. I took the gun away from my head and almost instantly, the ringing came back. Next I pointed the gun at my heart, but the tinnitus continued. When I again aimed the barrel at my head, the silence returned. Things became clear to me then. It was Dibbs all along. He was the ringing. It was like a demonic possession. When I put the gun to my head (and to Dibbs who was inside my head) he popped out. When the threat was gone, he came back in. The ringing was his presence. But he also maintained a physical presence, that of an old Jewish guy.

I put the gun down; the ringing immediately returned. I heard him in my head, he spoke through the ringing, "So you finally figured it out m'boy. Protect Mr. E, and all is

forgiven. Kill the woman and you get another bottle of blue retribution and money, lots of money."

"I'm not killing anyone, you fucking asshole!"

The pain began growing again. If I didn't kill the woman, I knew the blue retribution would drive me insane. The other option was suicide. At least, I wouldn't be hurting anyone else that way. I pressed the gun to my head and thumbed back the hammer. I was about to shoot when something that Dibbs had said flashed across my mind, "He's the Babe Ruth of serial killers." Then I recalled him saying, "One day without the pills and you'd kill Bo Derek herself for another fix." I looked at the clock: 1 p.m. then I looked at the list.

I took the pistol away from my head. I shoved it and the list into a paper sandwich bag. Then I flushed all my pills down the toilet. Not just the last blue ones, but all of them. Now, I'm just sitting on my bed, waiting. Waiting for the withdrawal to build, waiting for blue retribution to grow. In my right mind, I could never commit murder, but as Ted Danson once said, "Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods." Perhaps, I can harness the pain, use the insanity and direct the anger. Perhaps I can use blue

retribution, use it as fuel to make right some of the wrong I've done.

So it looks like I'm going to the Planting Fields after all. Not for Charlotte Horton, but for Mr. E the future Babe Ruth of serial killers. I'm trying to envision it, murdering E before he gets the chance to fulfill his destiny. I'm trying to project it into the tinnitus, with hopes that Dibbs can see my plan. Perhaps if he does, he'll come to the Planting Fields to try and stop me. Then maybe I can get both E and Dibbs. I'll do it Michael Corleone style. Then maybe, just maybe, I can get my life back. Dibbs has been ringing my bell for far too long. It's time for the fight to begin.